



## The Two-Purpose Syllabus: A Blueprint for Faculty and Students

Normally, we think of a syllabus as the document that contains all of the information pertaining to our course. However, the syllabus can actually serve two purposes: A blueprint for you as you plan your course and a blueprint for your students that can act as an advanced organizer and means of communication containing the course objectives, schedule of topics, assignments, assessments, and the grading policy for the course. Regardless of the function, a syllabus should reflect a conversational tone as it shows the students and others how the course and its material are relevant.

### **A Blueprint for Faculty**

You just received your semester teaching assignments and are pondering what should be included in your course, why students should take it, what students should learn, what textbook students should read, assignments, tests, grading, etc. There is so much to think about, that you're not sure where to begin. Using a syllabus template as your blueprint can be a useful tool in course planning.

*Introduction:* A good syllabus has an introduction that explains why the course is important and the methods you plan to use to help students learn. As part of your course planning, you should think about:

- The topics that students might already know.
- The real-life experiences students might have encountered and how they relate to your content.
- The types of delivery methods you are planning to use for the course.
- Your teaching philosophy and other beliefs concerning student learning.

*Course Goals:* While this section of most syllabi contains the heading "Course Goals", a better title might be "Course Outcomes" because outcomes are written in a way that helps students better understand what they should know or be able to do when they finish the course. In terms of course planning, you should be able to articulate these outcomes before you think about designing activities, assignments, tests, and other forms of evaluation because all of these components should help students achieve the outcomes. When thinking about your course outcomes, ask yourself, "If I'm a student in the course,

- What are the main concepts I should know by the end of the semester?
- What tasks should I be able to perform by the end of the semester?
- What perceptions should I have by the end of the semester?

*Course Activities:* This section should describe the different methods you plan to use in class to help students achieve the goals and learn the course content. For instance, if one of the goals of the course is to have students conduct an analysis then you should use methods in the course that give students practice doing that skill. Some questions to think about as you select activities:

- What is the purpose of the each activity you are planning to use?
- Do the activities help students achieve the intended learning outcomes?
- Do the activities match the form of assessment you are planning to use?

Textbooks and other Materials: Choosing a textbook can be a challenge and with the cost of texts nowadays, you want to make sure that the book(s) you choose will provide students with the concepts and skills necessary to learn the material and achieve the course goals. While you might not be able to find the perfect textbook, you should be able to explain to your students (or anyone else) why it is relevant to the course and why you chose it.

Course Assignments: Just as it is helpful for your students to have the assignment requirements as the semester begins, this section can help you identify and describe the major assignments (projects, essays, reports, etc.) that will give your students the opportunity to synthesize course concepts and engage in tasks that reinforce those presented in class. As you think about possible assignments, reflect back on your course goals and learning outcomes so that each assignment helps the students achieve those goals. As you design your assignments, ask yourself:

- Are there assignments that could be developed to mimic real-world tasks and projects?
- Is there an assignment that would help students pull together the critical concepts and tasks that they have been learning throughout the unit or the semester?
- Could a large assignment be broken into stages throughout the semester so you could periodically check student progress?
- What are the key elements, sections, or tasks that students need to include when they develop their solution?
- Is the assignment to be team-based, individual-based, or both?

Grading Policy: When you think about a grading policy for the course, you should consider the following:

- Will grades be calculated based on a percentage or based on a point scale?
- If you are having students work in teams, how much of the grade will be based on the team component and how much will be based on individual performance? To avoid student complaints, it is better to have the individual component worth more of the final grade.

Course Schedule: This is probably the most difficult part of the design of your course since you are literally planning the organization of topics, readings, and assignments for the entire semester. One helpful suggestion is to develop a table that has the following columns: Week, Date, Topic, Readings Due, and Assignments Due. By using a table such as this, you can map out the course topics by date and then easily track the readings related to the topic as well as activities, homework, and major assignments you plan to give your students. When planning a schedule, make sure you are aware of important religious holidays or University functions that might conflict with scheduled exams or assignments.

## Summary

By using the above explanations and examples as you plan your course, you should begin the semester with a plan that integrates your topics, assignments, and assessment with the goals you have for your students. Also, the information contained in your blueprint can be easily adapted for the syllabus you hand to your students at the beginning of the semester.

## A Blueprint for Students

The typical syllabus distributed in college courses is usually a document written in a style that leaves it up to the students to figure out why the course is relevant, why you are teaching it the way you are, and how the assignments are anything more than mundane exercises. Unfortunately, most of our students won't figure any of this out and will leave the course at the end of the semester still not knowing when they will ever need to use what you wanted them to learn.

If you want to avoid the outcome described above, you should consider giving your students a learner-centered syllabus that not only addresses these issues, but also communicates to your students that you understand their needs and interests (Diamond, 1998; Grunnert, 1997). A learner-centered syllabus will set a positive tone for the semester and be the first example to your students that you have put a great deal of thought and effort into helping them learn. Along with providing you with an outline, the following sections will give you some suggestions on how to write your syllabus in a more conversational tone. Examples of syllabi written in this style are available for download, please feel free to use and/or revise them as needed.

*Introduction:* Remember that this section is the first item that your students will read when they arrive in your course, so it should set the tone for the semester. The easiest way to do this is to think of how you would tell a student sitting in your office what your course is all about, what things they might already know about the topics in the course, the way you will be teaching the class, and what you expect from them during the semester. As a result, you should use words such as you, your, my, etc. Here are some sample phrases from an instructional design syllabus:

- Think about a time when you have designed something – a computer program, a garden, a class project, etc.
- Instructional design (ID) is very similar since it also involves a systematic set of steps and a reflective process. The biggest difference is that ID always involves the development of instruction to produce desired learning outcomes.
- In this course, you will learn and practice those principles. Through readings, class discussions, activities, projects, and case studies you will be given opportunities to reflect on what you are learning and apply the concepts to contexts in and out of class.
- My responsibility is to facilitate your learning of instructional design and its process; however, in order to do well in this course you must actively participate, continuously try to apply the concepts, and ask questions if you do not understand.

*Course Goals:* As you begin the semester you already know what you want to accomplish; however, your students do not know what to expect and therefore have no idea what they

should know or be able to do once they leave the course. You should take the opportunity in this section to tell them the goals they will be working toward. For example:

- This course will give you the opportunity to design, develop and implement instructional materials for a specific setting along with helping you develop your own skills as a designer. By the end of this course, you should be able to:
  - identify the individual steps in the instructional design process
  - analyze the needs, learners, and learning context using appropriate methods
  - evaluation and customize the design process to suit different contexts
  - develop your own personal framework of design to guide future design endeavors

Course Activities: This section is left out of most syllabi, but it is the best way to explain to your students how and why you are going to be using different teaching strategies throughout the semester. If students know up front that there is a specific reason that you are trying strategies (teamwork, case-based learning, etc.) and how those strategies will help them achieve, they are more likely to “buy-in” and thus, complain less. For example, “To learn the steps of instructional design, you will have the opportunity to work through solutions to real-world cases, participate in mini-design activities, and create an instructional product that meets the requirements of a particular client. By the end of the semester, you will have the beginnings of a design portfolio that contains your mini-designs as well as a final project report that describes the analysis, design, development, and evaluation of instructional materials for a specific learning goal.”

Textbooks and other Materials: A frequent complaint from students is that they pay a lot of money for a textbook and often don't really need it. Here's your opportunity to explain why you've chosen a particular text and how it will contribute to their learning. If you've chosen a mixture of required and recommended readings and texts, make sure you tell them why a text is only recommended so they can make an informed decision as to its purchase.

Course Assignments: In most syllabi, if this section is present it contains a list of the course projects and assignments that will be due throughout the semester. However, this section could be a valuable tool if it contained not only the major assignments, but also the purpose that each assignment serves in helping students learn. Here are some descriptions taken from an instructional design syllabus:

- Self-Assessments: The purpose of the self-assessments is to give each of us – you and me – the opportunity to check for your understanding of key concepts in the outside readings in the course. Furthermore, since the notes, discussions, and assignments in the class are based on these readings it is important that I know before class if there are any concepts that require further explanation in class. For this reason, your self-assessments (found on ANGEL) are due by 5pm on the day before class. This will give me an opportunity to enhance my presentation if necessary. (You may take the self-assessments multiple times if you wish.)
- Preliminary Case Analyses: In this class, I plan to use case-based learning to help you better understand the variety of situations that could occur during the different design phases. While we will be working on most of these during class time, your weekly assignment will be to answer the preliminary analysis questions in order to be prepared

for helping your teammates solve the cases. These assignments should be handed in using the ANGEL drop box for the week they are due before the beginning of class. A copy of your answers should also be brought with you to class.

- *Group project II – Presentation on interview with expert instructional designer:* In groups of two, three, or four (to be decided) you will select an “expert” instructional designer, interview this person, and present the results of the interview to the class. The interview is a mechanism to give you further insights into how experts conceive of their roles and their personal design frameworks and to then share your insights with the rest of your peers. You will need to make an argument about why this specific person was selected (i.e., what makes her/him an expert), provide brief educational and professional background information, and then interpret and present the interview results. The presentation should be a maximum of twenty minutes in length.

*Grading Policy:* Your grading policy section should give students a breakdown of exactly how much weight each assignment is given throughout the semester. Since Penn State uses specific letter grades, students should know how you plan to calculate the final grades of (A, A-, B+, etc.) the semester.

*Course Schedule:* If you used a table containing dates, topics, and items due when you were planning the course, then you should include it here as an advanced organizer for your students. A schedule such as this will keep students on task, show them how readings and assignments are relevant to particular course topics, and keep them from complaining that they didn’t know when an assignment were due.

*Course Policies and Statements:* This section usually contains information about policies that are specific to your course (attendance, late assignments, make-ups, etc.) and/or the University. At Penn State you are required to include an academic integrity statement and an explanation of how the academic integrity policies will be applied in your course. Here is the actual policy statement and a sample of how it will be applied:

“Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a basic guiding principle for all academic activity at The Pennsylvania State University, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle. Consistent with this expectation, the University's Code of Conduct states that all students should act with personal integrity, respect other students' dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts.

Academic integrity includes a commitment by all members of the University community not to engage in or tolerate acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception. Such acts of dishonesty violate the fundamental ethical principles of the University community and compromise the worth of work completed by others.” (Faculty Senate Policy 49-20, 2007).

Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the

instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students. Students who are found to be dishonest will receive academic sanctions and will be reported to the University's Judicial Affairs office for possible further disciplinary sanction."

Also, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 indicates accommodations should be made for persons with qualified disabilities. Penn State's Office for Disability Services (<http://www.equity.psu.edu/ods/index.html>) suggests that the following statement be included on syllabi:

"Note to students with disabilities: Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. If you have a disability-related need for reasonable academic adjustments in this course, contact the Office for Disability Services, ODS located in room 116 Boucke Building at 814-863-1807(V/TTY). For further information regarding ODS, please visit their web site at <http://www.equity.psu.edu/ods/> Instructors should be notified as early in the semester as possible regarding the need for reasonable academic adjustments." (Office for Disability Services, 2006)

### **Summary**

The information contained in this resource should help facilitate your course planning and also give you useful guidelines to follow as you prepare your syllabus. If you require assistance with the course planning or syllabus develop process, please contact the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence via email, [site@psu.edu](mailto:site@psu.edu) .

### **References**

Diamond, R. M. (1998) *Designing and assessing courses and curricula: a practical guide*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Grunnert, J. (1997). *The course syllabus: a learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker.

Lane, J. L. (Fall, 2005) *Syllabus for INSYS 415: Systematic Instructional Development*. Penn State University.

Penn State Faculty Senate (revised April, 2007). *Academic Integrity Policy 49-20*. Available at: <http://www.psu.edu/ufs/policies/>

Penn State Office for Disability Services (October, 2006). *Faculty Handbook*. Available at: <http://www.equity.psu.edu/ods/faculty/overview.asp>